



A Picture Story

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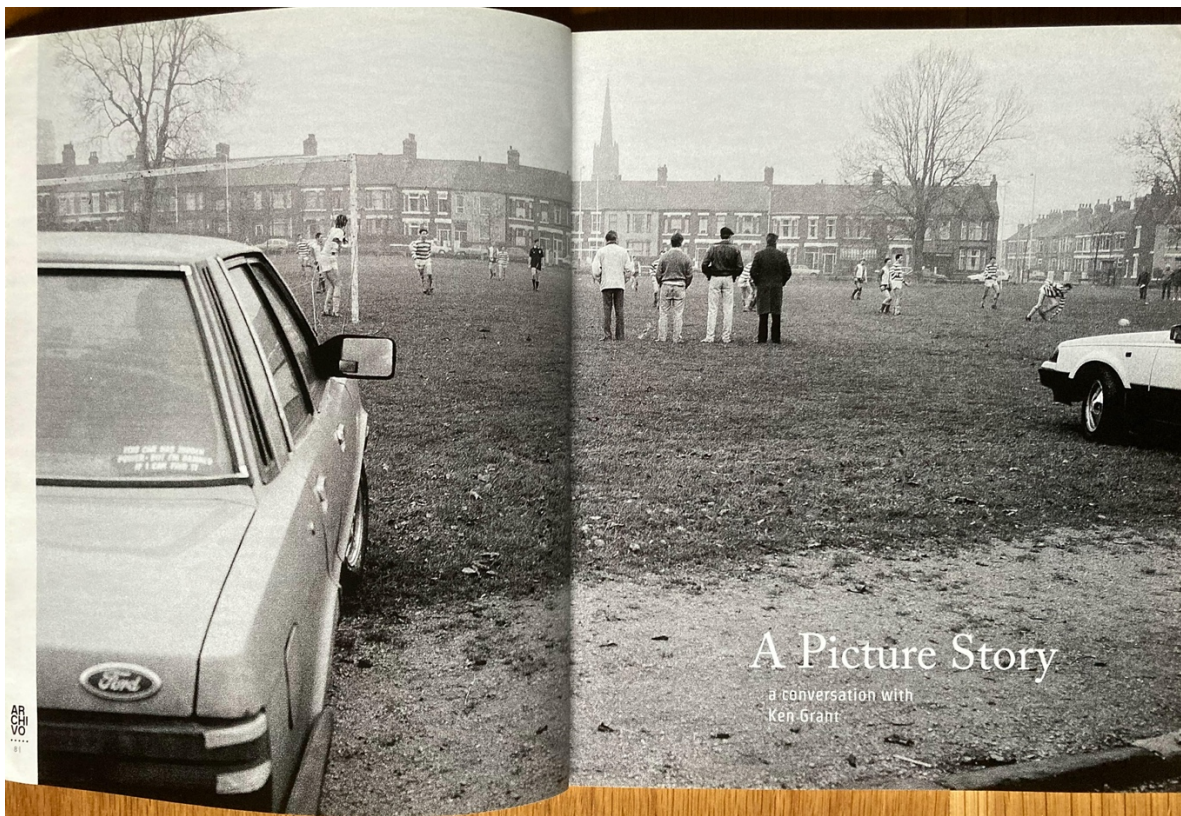
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Ken Grant (cover photograph and portfolio) included work from *A topical times* for these times and *No Pain Whatsoever* as part of a general interview about photography, teaching and documentary engagement.





A Picture Story

a conversation with
Ken Grant

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entre os seus alunos uma carta aludida documental - e com isso quer dizer simplesmente uma carta com o mundo, com as palavras e imagens e com as pessoas.

Tenho que referir que não era um tipo de educação restrito de arte. O mesmo espírito de trabalho que nos era colocado, estava ligado a muitas outras áreas. Fomos formados por escritores, fotógrafos, documentaristas, cineastas, artistas e cineastas, bem como alguns dos grandes nomes com quem estarei provavelmente familiarizado, da fotografia britânica.

A partir dessa altura, comecei a trabalhar fortemente a respeito de fotografia, segundo um apuramento em Liverpool, a 10 minutos a pé do campo de futebol e continuei a fotografar. As experiências, os trabalhos, as imagens e as coisas que passamos a fazer de estudo que tornaram as coisas mais fáceis. Também houve momentos para reações e por isso - as coisas não se passaram no Reino Unido e a coisa como por exemplo a Libération, em Paris, que fazia uma revista das coisas das imagens. O Libération mostrou que desde a minha época de uma forma mais evidente que no Reino Unido - era possível trabalhar em tempo que se aproximava dos meus interesses.

Para além disso, também foi necessário de longa duração e considero mais projetos de longo, aprendendo - embora não me tenha apercebido disso na altura - como era possível trabalhar nestas áreas em coisas que poderiam, por vezes, ser usadas financeiramente.

No início dos anos 90, tinha uma breve ligação a uma agência de fotografia em Londres, que circulava os meus trabalhos, mas acabou por perceber que não havia uma grande distribuição digital. Com isso a liberdade, não era o lugar ideal para mim.

Eu não sou um "trabalhador quieto" (Londres para procurar trabalhos). Também trabalhei, durante anos, como assistente de fotografia em trabalhos comerciais.

E o trabalho paralelo, muitas vezes não mencionado, que me levou a isso. Tenho conversado recentemente com alguns sobre os seus projetos pessoais e em como isso é apenas uma parte da disciplina que necessitam de equilibrar - mas todos têm a sua forma de encontrar um lugar para os seus trabalhos, desde que estejam suficientemente determinados - e, para a maioria dos fotógrafos, isso envolve apenas uma decisão.

Trabalhei, durante muitos anos, numa zona mais ou menos delimitada, na área de Liverpool. Houve alguma razão específica para essa escolha de território?

Havia algumas razões, mas acho que não há uma razão específica. As imagens que eu fotografava, com muito mais um olhar do que no resto de Liverpool, onde passava grande parte da minha infância. Foi a casa da família de minha mãe, situada ao longo da estrada de futebol e a um par de milhas do rio Mersey.

No Grã-Bretanha as condições desportivas foram frequentemente criadas por habitações com terraços, abando no norte da cidade. Liverpool era uma cidade com uma zona muito densamente povoada para a classe média - com todos os benefícios e qualidades que isso trouxe. Eu sou uma pessoa a quem a fotografia me deu uma perspectiva sobre o mundo. Não há nada mais importante para mim do que a fotografia, mas não há nada mais importante para mim do que a fotografia, então todo o - o quê - as famílias, os trabalhos, e também

I did exhibitions, got some regular work and won some prizes and fellowships that made things easier. I would also do commissions for magazines and newspapers - the usual UK titles and other like Libération in Paris, for example, which used pictures really well. Libération would be open to ideas in a way that I found less so in the UK - you could work on things close to your own interests. I did long term residencies too and smaller commissions in the region, learning - although I didn't realize it at the time - how it was possible to turn interests into things that could sometimes be financially supported. In the early 1990s I had a brief association with a picture agency in London and they would circulate work for me, but the agency eventually folded as digital distribution took over. In all honesty, it wasn't a great fit for me. I was in the North and rarely wanted to visit London and ask for jobs. I also worked for years assisting photographers on commercial jobs. It's the unspoken work that keeps a lot of us going. I've occasionally talked to students about their personal projects and how that's only part of the discipline they need to balance - but everyone has their own way of making space for their own work if they're determined enough - and there's no one way for most photographers.

You spent many years working in a more or less defined area, around Liverpool. Was there any specific reason for this choice of territory?

There were a few reasons, but I suppose at first it was about photographing somewhere I wanted to stay close to. The pictures I've made loosely map out a district in North Liverpool where I had spent a lot of my childhood. It was my father's family home, just along the street from the football stadium and a couple of miles from the river Mersey.

In Britain the sports stadia were often originally surrounded by terraced housing and close to the city. Liverpool was like this. The district was once a densely populated working class area - with all the challenges and qualities that brings with it. I felt like I was connected to something and photography allowed me to

get perspective on it. There was nowhere more logical for me to photograph, everything was there - home, families, work, the football.

After a while, I started to realize the gaps that existed in these areas. In the 1950s and 60s, families - including some of my own - were relocated to the edges of the city to 'new towns' after the older housing was condemned as unfit for people to live in. It was a move made in good faith, though in real terms what progressed was far from perfect - Nick Brownfield's 1971 documentary film about the Rent Strike in Liverpool is as clear an account as you're likely to find of that displacement, as well as a grounding in the politics of resistance amongst the articulate working class of Liverpool - and there's plenty of them around, believe me.

But there was something else... I only tend to photograph what I feel close to, what I connect with and what I can't ignore. The work is made through impulse and preoccupation, by going over the same ground again and again to be at a kind of 'touching distance'. That's where it might fail as any regular kind of documentary - and if it does, that doesn't really concern me. It might be humanism, but it probably isn't. I'm not that sentimental. It isn't any kind of picture story, because they often disappoint me - life isn't as neat and tidy as they often are.

Liverpool has always had plenty of visitors, photographing and leaving - and for years those transient accounts perplexed me - they were often compromised by brevity or sensation. Now I'm older, I feel less interested in that. I suppose I'm looking for work that gets me beyond the threshold, in every sense. It doesn't happen often and good examples are rare, but when they come, the heart soars... Terence Davies did it recently. For a few brief moments in 'Of time and the City', he brought sound and film together and offered something transcendent, moving and utterly affecting about where he was from and I guess that's what we could reach for as a test. The American William Christenberry, when asked, said 'my art is where I'm from'. How easy that is as an answer? ... but what

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a test for anyone to measure their work against, when all is said and done and the pictures are left, what do they add up to?...

Was there a method you created/
followed in order to create such
a singular body of work?

It's not really a method, more of a hesitation. I work long terms and tend to avoid putting series to rest until either I'm asked to do a book or show for example or until a relationship ends. That's not always the best way to be, but it gives me time to be pretty sure of things, to leave work and come back to it and to think hard about what its doing. In the *Class* Season, there was a final series of pictures but they all came from different series that I'd worked on at the same time for years. Things took shape over time and the influences and qualities I felt work against aren't always photographic. When I'm thinking about how the pictures are resolved, I remember the Czech photographer Josef Sudek measuring his work against the music of the composer Janacek - perhaps Sudek felt his pictures needed to connect on levels beyond the formal surface of the picture - not a bad challenge to spend a lifetime working on.

You recently published two books, how was the editing process, considering the large picture archive?

Over time the good pictures tend to stay near the surface and I come back to them from time to time, pulling them out, printing proofs and making dummies. When I sent Gosta Flemming the wide edit for *No man whatsoever* I was pretty sure of the kind of structure or the feel of things needed - after all I'd made four dummies over the years and showed them to people I take advice from - but I still needed his collaboration and guidance - and fresh eyes. He's a gifted and thoughtful book editor - and though we seem cut from similar cloth, he made connections and took a few chances I didn't imagine with the page layout. *Flock* was different as it came from a five-year residency and needed to account for that.

I'd worked digitally and everything took shape on screen – as things developed, I made magazines to give out to the people I was photographing, so I started to build a sense of how pictures worked with others. I stayed close to the sequencing and editing over those years. When it came to doing the book I worked with Tony Waddingham in Belgium who worked up a design based on my early suggestions. I like it but know in truth it's a small part of the work, an overview of a commission. There's another edit which is just about the one room where most things happened and I still like that a lot. I hope that'll appear at some point, but the moment's probably passed.

You've worked in assignments for a number of international newspapers. What's your opinion on the way pictures are used for media purposes?

If you mean am I nervous about my work being mis-read, then yes, I am, but it's rare that my pictures reach newspapers these days unless it's to promote a book or exhibition. It depends then on making sure the person writing about the work is the right one. Once past that hurdle, newspapers often use pictures well, as they're aware of the power of design and often lead with the pictures, dropping texts in. The *Sunday Times* has done good things recently with its magazine and, even though I rarely work in those worlds now, it's great to see picture editors keeping the value of photography forefront in their magazines.

There was a moment when I thought good photography would be 'retired' in favour of those lifestyle stories that mean nothing, but that hasn't happened and amongst some news magazines in the UK, Cheryl Newman and Emma Bowkett have championed a lot of the work my students have done over the years, perhaps in spite of any other pressures from editors that may exist. That's great to see.

What's your opinion towards the distinction between documentary and photojournalism?

There is one, and it's still an evolving discussion though I've always had an

Algum tempo depois, comecei a perceber as lacunas existentes nessas áreas. Nos anos 50 e 60, as famílias - incluindo algumas dos meus - foram transferidas para a periferia da cidade para "new towns", após as autoridades as pessoas habitarem. Foi uma atitude muito simples para, apesar de, na realidade, ter resultado em algo muito longe de ser perfeito - o documentário de Nick Brownfield, de 1970, sobre a "Rant Strike" em Liverpool, é um dos relatos mais esclarecedores desse deslaminamento, tendo servido de base à política de resistência da articulação classe operária de Liverpool - e há muitos relatos por aí, pode acreditar em mim.

Mas havia algo mais... Eu tenho tendência para fotografar apenas aquilo a que me sinto próximo, aquilo com que me relaciono e aquilo que não posso ignorar. O trabalho é feito através de impulsos e presenças, revisitando os mesmos lugares vezes sem conta para manter uma espécie de "distância de contacto". É ali que o trabalho pode fazer, como em qualquer tipo de documental, e se eu não me acostoo não me preocupa assim tanto. Pode ser humanista, mas provavelmente não é, eu não vou assim tão sentimental. Não é em qualquer tipo de história visual, porque muitas vezes desiludem-me - a vida nem sempre dá lá tempo e arrumada, como muitas vezes o são as histórias visuais.

Liverpool teve sempre grandes visitantes, fotografaram e desapareceram — e durante anos essas relações transbordaram. Mas, depois de 1960, as visitas vieram comprometidas pela brevidade ou simplicidade. Agora, os fãs não têm mais nenhum interesse nisso. Ache que principia talvez o tempo que me leve para além da superfície, em todos os sentidos. Não há acontecimentos mundiais e não há exemplos clássicos, mas quando surgem, o charme é novo... Serão fotografados e desaparecerão. Por alguns breves momentos, em "Of Time and the City", ele uniu isso a cinema, criou algo transcendente, tocante e totalmente convincente sobre o local de onde era, e eu acho que isso é o que poderíamos ambicionar alcançar. O norte-americano William Christenberry, quando fotografava, não queria ninguém, não estava interessado em si mesmo, mas eu acho que, no entanto, que todos nós estamos para interferir com o trabalho de qualquer um, quando tudo estiver tão lá e as imagens terminadas, qual é o seu trabalho dele?

Desenvolveu algum método para construir um corpo de trabalho visual por um período de tempo tão longo?

[illegible]

Publicou, recentemente, dois livros. Tendo em conta o extenso arquivo de imagens, não se trata de uma edição de luxo?

Ao longo do tempo, as boas fotografias tendem a mudar de lugar, a ir à superfície, e de vez em quando revisita-as, fazendo novas leituras, novas provas de impressão e maquetes de livro.



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A black and white photograph of a beach scene. In the foreground, a young man in a striped shirt stands on the left, looking towards the right. In the center, another young man holds a baby in his arms. The background shows the ocean with several people swimming. The sky is overcast.

Quando enviei a Giba Flammig a longa edição para *No Pain Whatever*, estava bastante certo do tipo de estrutura ou sensação necessária – linha, inclusive, feliço quatro maquetes ao longo dos anos, mostrando-a a pessoas em quem confio – e da sua outra fresta. Ele é um editor talentoso e sério – e embora tenhamos escolhido bastante próximo, ele fez alterações e sugeriu algumas alterações que eu não havia sequer imaginado para a estrutura do livro. Como projecto, *No Pain Whatever* foi diferente, tendo sido desenvolvido numa resiliência de cinco anos, sendo necessário essa ligação.

Trabalhei diariamente e todos ganhamos forma no mundo – a medida que o projeto se foi desenvolvendo, fui criando revistas para dar às pessoas que fotografai, pelo que fui percebendo a forma como as imagens se relacionavam umas com as outras. Azeitegnahua de perto a significação e edição das imagens ao longo desses anos. Na altura de fazer o meu trabalho com Tony Waddingham, na Bélgica, que desenvolvi um layout baseado nas minhas primeiras sugestões. Eu fiquei satisfeito, mas sei que, na verdade, se trata de uma pequena parte do trabalho: uma visão parcial de uma comissão. Há uma outra edição que trata apenas do contexto onde a maioria das coisas aconteceram, e da qual eu conto e gostar bastante. Espero que ela ainda possa vir a ser aperfeiçoada, mas provavelmente esse momento já passou.

Trabalhou em comissões para uma série de jornais internacionais. Qual a sua opinião relativamente à forma

Se se referir ao facto de ficar nervoso perante a possibilidade do meu trabalho ser mal entendido, então sim, fics. Mas actualmente é raro que as minhas imagens alcancem jornais, a não ser para publicar um livro ou exposição. Depois é necessário fazer o possível para que a pessoa que escreve sobre o trabalho seja a pessoa ideal para essa tarefa. Uma vez ultrapassado esse obstáculo, os jornais costumam usar bem as imagens, estando cientes do poder do design e muitas vezes as fotografias têm o papel principal, com os textos a acompanhar. Recentemente o *Sunday Times* tem feito boas coisas com a sua revista e, embora actualmente seja muito raro que colabore com esse mundo, é ótimo ver editores de imagem que manêm o valor da fotografia de forma honesta nas suas revistas.

Houve um momento em que pensei que a boa fotografia estaria "reformada", dando o seu lugar a essas histórias de estilo de vida que não significam nada, mas isso não aconteceu e entre algumas revistas de notícias no Reino Unido, Cheryl Newman e Emma Bowditch têm defendido uma grande parte do trabalho realizado pelos meus alunos ao longo dos anos, talvez apesar de todas as pressões que possuem vir de outros editores. É ótimo constatar isso.

Qual é a sua opinião relativamente à distinção entre documentário e fotojornalismo?

Existe uma, e é ainda uma discussão em evolução, embora sempre tenha sido uma relação ambivalente com estes termos e com a sua utilização. Se se tratar de um bom trabalho, incorridos nos seus moveis. Durante a última década e meia, o folclore conheceu um movimento em direcção à multimídia e isso é emocionante e pertencente. A maioria das pessoas que os ensina estão tão confortáveis a trabalhar em vídeo, como a trabalhar em câmaras para revistas ou a desenvolverem projectos editoriais.

Os fotógrafos precisam de se envolver a tantos níveis quanto forem necessários. Em termos de documentário, e eu provavelmente sentir-me-ia mais confortável a jogar nesta equipa, slow documentar tem encontrado uma relevância nos últimos anos. Refiro-me a Rob Horstma e em Saché ou o trabalho de Dana Lissberg no Alasca e na Califórnia, talvez Seth e Goldsmith ou a América, e ainda David Goldblatt ou

ambivalent relationship with these terms and their use. If it's good work, it troubles us or moves us. For the last decade and a half there has been movement in photojournalism towards multimedia and that's exciting and appropriate. Most people I've taught are as comfortable making film work as they are working on picture assignments for magazines or developing book projects.

Photographers need to engage on all levels as necessary. In terms of documentary, and I'd probably feel more comfortable playing in this team, 'slow documentary' has found a relevance in recent years. I'm thinking of Rob Hornstra in Sochi or Dana Liebenberg's work in Alaska and California, maybe Soth or Goldberg in America, David Goldblatt of course in South Africa. Then there's also a rich and subjective strain of work like JH Engstrom, Mikhailov or Bertien van Mennen, and many more like them, making work that's formally beautiful, intimate and emotionally driven.

It's clear that younger photographers don't have those traditional grooves to limit them any more – if they ever really did. In some respects, those terms are hangovers from a time when magazines ran stories and not much else. They still do, but the platforms for putting work into the world are far more diverse now and far more available.

Documentary is still a very undefined, and often misunderstood genre in photography. How would you define it, or what does it mean to you?

It isn't always clear is it and I often work with people who resolutely resist any association with it... but that's because their definition seems based in some kind of past, in a strict definition that's been long gone for a very long time. It's sometimes a distraction to even dwell on it, but my understanding of [for what it's worth] is an inclusive one. From John Grierson's 'creative treatment of actuality' in 1926, through Walker Evans' 'documentary style' in the 1930s and David Goldblatt's sustained account of his country over several generations, there has been a steady flow

of interpretation. Ideas like Otto Steinert's 'subjective photography' and the kind of Scandinavian intimacies found in Jacob Sobol, Anders Petersen and others have become more pronounced in recent decades. That seems to be one strand of a gradual sensitizing of personal lives that started, if we think about it, long before Nan Goldin struck such a profound note in the 1980s. These are works diverse in approach and emphasis but they're undeniably about an immersed engagement with what we're trying to make sense of.

When people talk to me about documentary, I refer them to Walker Evans' suggestion that while people thought he was doing one thing, as some kind of dispassionate documentary observer, he believed - he *knew* - he was doing something entirely different. His attitude was more modern than some people's ideas are even now.

This is a complicated, layered world and plenty of people are making work that effortlessly resists those old pigeonholes, which can seem superfluous and besides the point. They're not something I carry with me most days.

Parallel to your artistic work, you also teach photography. Based on your experience, what's the role of a photography lecturer?

It depends who you're working with. In my time I've worked through most aspects of teaching, from community collaborations and residencies to supporting postgraduate students involved in historical research, so the role changes each time. The last two decades have been spent with students who are picture makers, strongly motivated to explore their own ideas as photographers long before they reach me, which is great for me. I don't have to persuade anyone to make work, why would I? I listen to where they are in their plans and often find myself trying to test and even dismantle those first ideas, to help them articulate and contextualize their motivations. I introduce them to strategies or approaches that they may not be familiar with and be a foil for the development of work that is capable of sustaining itself in this world.

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